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Goodbye, IBM; hello, harmony

Lisa Whaley, who thought she had it all, realized her obsession with work made her feel like a failure in her personal life. So she quit.

By **DAVE GUSSOW**
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Lisa Whaley thought she had the good life. But the former IBM executive worked too much, paid too little attention to her family and ignored her own needs.

Sick, depressed and wracked by guilt that she had let others down, Whaley one day in 2002 decided she could take no more. She started her car in the garage and wanted to die.

"I had not really experienced adversity or failure in my life," said Whaley, 44. "When it all happened, I was ill-equipped to handle it. ... Because I was ashamed and I was embarrassed, I didn't want to get help."

Whaley, though, turned off the engine. She couldn't bear the thought of her daughter finding her slumped over the wheel.

It was a stunning moment for what Whaley describes as, up to then, something of "a fairy tale life": a loving and supportive family growing up, a straight A student, good job right out of college, marriage, children and a successful 22-year career with IBM.

It made her reassess who she was, what she was doing and where she wanted to go, an exercise she thinks is vital for people who



San Jose Mercury News / Len Vaughn-Lahman

Former IBM executive Lisa Whaley, 44, signs copies of her book *Reclaiming My Soul from the Lost and Found* at IBM's Research Center in San Jose in June.

find themselves with their work and personal lives out of kilter.

Technology causes at least some of the problems. Being always connected with cell phones and e-mail sounds good, but it too often means blurring the lines between personal time and work, she says. A global economy adds to the pressure, stretching the workweek to a 24/7 mentality.

"The pace is so fast, and people want to get ahead and it's so competitive, people feel

they have to do this to stay ahead of the game," she said. But, "we're reaching our threshold where we can't keep up as human beings with the technology."

Make no mistake: She blames herself for not recognizing the warning signs in her life. It wasn't IBM, it wasn't her family, it was her.

Throughout her life, she says, she thrived

Please see **WHALEY 2D**

Whaley from 1D

on the pressure. "It was not enough to meet people's expectations," she said. "I had to exceed them. People expected a lot from me and I (felt I) have to deliver. If I entered a contest, people expected me to win. It was definitely self-imposed, this innate desire to please people and not disappoint."

Whaley worked to take back her life, consulting with a minister, a psychiatrist, a therapist and a medical doctor. She and her husband put their faltering marriage back on track. She forced her teenage daughter into a wilderness program to break her of a drug habit.

Whaley quit her job at IBM in April to write a self-published book (*Reclaiming My Soul from the Lost and Found*, \$27.95). She became a life and career coach, as well as a motivational speaker.

Her decision to leave IBM was difficult, she says, but it was necessary. "I did have this fear of, 'What am I doing?' " she said. "Sometimes we don't get what we want in life because we don't take action. I did it and I'm having a blast."

From her talks and working with people, she knows many people fear changing course or leaving a job. But for many who do, she says, it's a liberating experience.

At this time of year, when people make resolutions to do better, lose weight and generally reassess life, Whaley says it's important for those who feel overworked and burned out to take a step back.

"Take the time to sit down and really think about what kind of life you want to have," Whaley said from her home in Connecticut. "Actually write it down. Visualize, 'If I could have the ideal personal and professional life equation, what does it look like?'"

The answer is not "balance," Whaley says, which is an imperfect goal. Sometimes, someone will have to devote more time to work than family, or vice versa. She prefers to go for a goal of "harmony."

"Where we get ourselves in trouble," Whaley said, "is we make the choices and we're not okay with the consequences, but we do it anyway."

The perspective also can be different for the worker and his or her family. For example, telecommuting to Whaley meant she would be around her family more. Her teenage daughters, however, felt "she's not paying attention to us," Whaley said.

Instead of unwinding with the family, maybe a late e-mail check gets done. Or the family is watching TV while a parent taps away on a notebook computer.

"From a child's perception, physically you're there, but you're really not present," Whaley said.

If she had a lot of work to do and was watching TV with her kids, she felt guilty about ignoring work. When she took a medical leave, she thought she was letting her co-workers down.

The key, Whaley says, is to set priorities. So reserve specific times, say from 6 to 8 p.m., just for family. No work allowed.

"It really takes a lot of discipline to adhere to this," Whaley said. "It's almost like the computer is calling your name."

Corporate America may share some of the blame for the stress and burnout that workers feel, Whaley says, but the real culprits are people who allow it to happen by not defining boundaries between work and personal time.

In addition, Whaley suggests that people take the time to celebrate success, something she didn't do. As soon as she got a promotion, she says, she was thinking of the next step up the ladder.

At least part of the fix is to turn off the cell phones, put away the notebook computers and not be connected 24/7. And there's what she calls the SPA plan: State what you want to do, Plan it so you can accomplish it, then Act on it.

"At the end of the day, you are the most important person in your life," Whaley said.